

INTERVIEWEE: HOLLY NEAR

INTERVIEWER: Victor Cohen

DATE: April 11, 2010

VC: It is April 11, 2010, and I'm speaking by phone with Holly Near. Holly, I want to kind of go back a little and sort of trace through your personal history, up to when you started doing stuff, the more political work and the music. I guess the first question is, when did you come to Los Angeles? I know you were an actor on the stage and in movies, but when did you start doing music?

HN: I came to Los Angeles right out of high school. I went to UCLA, actually, where you're going to be putting in the archives.

VC: When was that?

HN: Nineteen sixty-seven. I graduated in June, so it was the fall of '67. I went in to the Theater Arts and Political Science Department. When you're a freshman, you don't really have to declare, but that was kind of where I was looking to be, even though most of my classes were just your basic English, science, math sort of thing. While I was there in the theater I was invited by a senior actor to be in his final scene for his graduation. I was in like the top six. They chose six people who were in the department to give a performance, and at that performance, usually, people from the industry would come to see who the new crop of actors were at UCLA. He was in musical theater. His name was Gordon Duval. And he was going to do a scene from *110 in the Shade*, which is the musical version of – it blanked out on me. It'll

come to me. An American play, it was turned into a musical. Oh, *Rainmaker*. I played his partner in that. It was a ten minute scene out of the musical.

And it was great because it wasn't *my* final. I didn't have to have the nerves of all of that. All these agents saw me and that night several people approached me, and within a few weeks I had an agent to work in L.A. So I never finished my freshman year. I guess I went through the year, but I didn't turn in any finals. I said, "I'm going to go to work." Because I got a job in a film immediately. Then after that, several other films, and television shows. I did a run on Broadway in *Hair* about three years after – it had been running for a couple years. I just started working.

Then, when I was in Los Angeles – I came back from doing *Hair* and was hanging out with a friend I'd met at UCLA who was a choreographer, an African American man. He and I had talked politics quite a bit when I'd been in school, about wishing that we could – and I had done this all through high school. I'd come from a political family, and I had sung folk music, and I'd grown up on the Weavers and Paul Robeson. That music had been in my life. And we were just talking about what a luxury it would be to be able to not only do the arts, but to do it in some kind of a social change context, something that was politically and emotionally meaningful, and not just doing sitcoms.

I gotta say, I got some great sitcoms. I did *All in the Family* and *Room 222* and *The Partridge Family*. I got to do some fun sitcoms. But we were talking about the depth that might be missing from – even though I've got to say *All in the Family* was one of the most outspoken television – it was a real landmark television

show. And I had been in a film that George Roy Hill directed that was called *Slaughterhouse Five*. Actually, that was a little bit later. But I got to be in some good stuff.

Anyway, we were having this conversation and he said, "I just heard about an audition that they're trying to replace a woman who can't go on the tour, and it's these artists who have been out going around the country performing for men and women in the military who are resisting war and racism from within the military." I said, "You gotta be kidding. There are soldiers doing that?" And he said, "Yeah. These are people that have been to Vietnam, they know what's going on there, they're coming back, and they're talking about it."

So I went to the audition, and it turned out it was the Free the Army show that Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland and several other people had been doing across the country. They were about to head in to the Pacific, and one of their people in their ensemble couldn't go. So I auditioned for that and within weeks – within days, actually, we were heading for New York to do a big fundraiser with Edith Simon at the Philharmonic, and we went down to Fort Dix, I think it was, and did one of the shows for the soldiers, and then we headed off for the Pacific.

So I kind of went from a sort of naive curiosity, not naive in the sense that I didn't have *any* political experience, but I couldn't have called myself really a sophisticated and totally informed participant, and jumped right into going to the Philippines, where there was martial law, and we would come to a place and set up our own stage and our own – have you seen the FTA show?

VC: No, I haven't.

HN: It would help you a lot to see that. That was one of the most extraordinary political movements of the time, was the G.I. movement. There's two films to see. One is FTA and the other is called *Sir, No Sir*, which is a film about the soldiers movement. I think you probably should see *Sir, No Sir* first, and then you can see FTA because then you can see the context in which we were traveling and performing.

I was just running to keep up. It was amazing. I didn't know what a military industrial complex was, and I was trying to learn what does martial law mean. And of course Jane Fonda was so visible that everywhere we went there was a huge amount of press, a lot of attention, a lot of conflict. We'd set up these stages and perform \_\_\_\_\_. The soldiers would be alerted, and they came by the thousands. It's unbelievable. You look at the footage, you look at their faces, it's just amazing. \_\_\_\_\_ kids with the possibility of being thrown into stockades are forming petitions and are speaking out, are getting beaten up by pro-war Marines. That was our audience. We went to the Philippines, Okinawa, Japan, Hawaii.

So when I came back, as you might imagine, I was a slightly altered person. I was wandering around. I went and did some more film and television work, but I just felt that I couldn't – either I couldn't or I didn't want to be without the stimulation that I had felt, the vibrant very present kind of life and death work. I'm sure that if I had gotten a film that had taken me away to a location for six weeks, and I'd been redirected immediately back into the industry, that's where I would have been. But that didn't happen.

So I was sitting with this experience and realizing that Len Chandler – do you know who that is when I say that? He's an African American singer/songwriter, part of the civil rights movement. He was on this tour. And you'll hear a lot of his – in fact, one of the – I'll just tell you this in confidentiality – one of the problems with the film is that they actually put too much of his music in, because the director was really entranced by it, and rightly so. All the songs are wonderful. But it actually doesn't serve the film to have quite so many songs. He lives in L.A. You could probably get an interview with him. I can't imagine he didn't sing at the Ash Grove.

VC: That's Len Chandler.

HN: Yeah. He had all these songs for every moment that we – something would happen and he would break into song that was completely appropriate for that moment. And I didn't have the materials. Most of the FA war songs I knew were from a man's point of view. And I was on the tour to try to speak more to the women in the audience, women who were both military personnel – they weren't soldiers at that time. They didn't allow them out on the battle field. But they were nurses and support teams and administration. They had a lot of really vibrant and complex stories to tell.

So I was supposed to be doing material that would speak to them, and I realized, aside from what I was given in the script, which were two songs written by Beverly \_\_\_\_\_. Are you familiar with her?

VC: No.

HN: She's another person you might want to contact. She's in New York, in Brooklyn. She was a radical songwriter back then, before me, and the two songs that were in the script that I was supposed to sing were both some of the songs. I was not yet a feminist. Well, I was standing up there saying lines and singing songs of a person I had not yet become. It was really amazing, to have a script \_\_\_\_\_. I don't really know much about this. I think I could even go so far as to say – if you'd have asked me back then I probably would have said, well, I don't know, I'm not a feminist. There are a lot of loud, outspoken, angry women, or some kind of stereotypical comment. I didn't really understand in any depth what women were responding to. And being with Jane and Francine Parker, who was the director of the film, and two African American women who – it was a very balanced team. They made an effort to have it be half women and half people of color, which of course I had never experienced anything like that before. Now sometimes a more common requirement, but back in – this was a startling experience for me.

I came back frustrated by, in some cases, the shallowness of the work I would be doing in Hollywood, but also realizing that I didn't have the material as a singer – and I had all these experiences welling up in me, so I began to write songs. I'd written a song or two in high school, not very good, but I'd done some songwriting just because I was in a musical family, that's what we did, we did music. But nothing quite like what happened as a result of this tour.

I went to try to get a couple record companies, I had several auditions, made lots of demos. Got comments like, you have a strong voice, you write good melodies, but you can't have these words.

VC: Really! And this would have been in the early seventies at this point.

HN: This would have been '72. So I decided that I didn't want these songs to – I was starting to sing in some clubs, and starting to have a voice onstage, and I wanted some songs to sing. So I sang these, and then ultimately ended up not being able to get them recorded, and I thought, well, I can go back and get a record contract later, I'm just going to go into a little studio and record these songs, so that when I do antiwar events I can have a record to sell and have people take the songs home with them. So I started my own record company.

VC: Was that where you did "Hang In There"?

HN: Yes. That was the first one.

VC: And that was all you going in by yourself, paying for it, and selling it at events?

HN: Yes. And when I found out that you had to have \_\_\_\_\_ business license in order do that, that's when I took the name Redwood Records, because my father had a little rural country property real estate business in northern California called Redwood Realty, so I just called mine Redwood Records. And my mother and father became the first employees, you know, they weren't really being paid, and they packed and shipped the records out of their living room.

I didn't know at the time anything about a record company, or making a record. I just went ahead and did it. Which in hindsight, I think, well, that was sort of stupid. I should have at least given myself a year to study recording. But my sisters and I – I have two sisters – we had done a show called the Near Sisters, and I was asked to go to the Santa Monica Pier for a demonstration fundraising event, because they were going to tear down the pier. I actually think Ed might have been

part of that. You should ask him. It was quite an extraordinary achievement, where a group of people got together and saved the Santa Monica Pier. This one event that we did, we – have you been down to the Santa Monica Pier?

VC: Sure.

HN: Where the carousel is?

VC: Mm-hmm.

HN: Well, the party was in the carousel room, and people were on the carousel going round and round. So my sisters and I were singing and the people were hearing like every fourth bar as they went around. I had written a song for it called "The Santa Monica Pier," and while there I met a man named Alex Hassilev and his date Julie Thompson. They came up and started talking to me and it turned out Alex was a member of the Limelighters and were kind of as well known as the Kingston Trio and all of those three guy folk bands that were around at the time.

After many conversations, Alex, it turns out, had a home studio, so my pianist at the time, who I had gone to high school with, and had done a lot of co-writing with me, his name is Jeff Langley, he and I went into Alex's studio and brought in a few musicians, including my sisters, to sing backup vocals, and that's how we made "Hang In There."

VC: No kidding. That sounds great. I think it worked out well.

HN: It did work out very well. I still wish that I had done a little more homework about how to run a record company, but at any rate, not knowing that, we did it quite differently. And I had found out later that with the exception of maybe an African American woman in Philadelphia, who I've never been able to really find out who



she is, but that I may very well have been the first woman to start an independent record company in the United States. I didn't know that. It kind of set a model for other independent record companies. Most of the companies in L.A. weren't corporate yet, they were still owned by individuals. There wasn't Sony. (chuckles) There may have been one or two that were owned by corporations, but for the most part, radio stations still had independent DJs, and record companies still had the old people running them.

So this was a break away from that, to have a female artist start her own independent – outside the industry. I mean, Herb Alpert had a record company. I'm not saying there weren't artists that had record companies, but I don't think there were any women, and there weren't any that had decided to step outside of the industry and work in the independent movement. So we started distributing by hand-carrying everything. When I would do a concert across the country, I'd go into the record stores and get their business card, or I would in the airport tear out the page from the Yellow Pages of the record stores and book stores in that town and send it to my parents, and they would send out a letter saying, "Holly was just in your town. If you get any requests for her records, this is where you find them." Later on, there was a broader distribution network we began, but that was kind of the starting point for it.

I never would have had the visibility, the jumpstart, if I hadn't been traveling with Jane. I mean, when I say I pulled this off as an independent artist, I pulled it off because everywhere she went she took me to sing with her, and there were thousands of people there. So I wasn't starting from scratch.

VC: Can I ask you, earlier you said that you were always – one of the thing I wanted to ask you is how you sort of came to the Left, so I think the initial answer is the Free the Army tour? Is that right?

HN: It is. I mean, when I was actually on the campus at UCLA I really focused on wanting to do musical theater. The truth is that Angela Davis was on campus teaching and I didn't know who she was, and I didn't take any classes from her. But I had a family history of coming up through a progressive family, so it wasn't that I was conservative.

VC: When you say "progressive" what do you mean?

HN: The conversations that would happen around the table between my parents and guests that would come were – we knew about the Rosenbergs having been executed, we knew about the music of Paul Robeson and him having been blacklisted. My father actually had lost his seniority in his job in Los Angeles as a labor organizer during the McCarthy era. My parents read I.F. Stone's Weekly. That came in the mail on a regular basis, which was a political rag that was sent out. My mother was a delegate for a third-party candidate. My father got on the school board in this little town called Potter Valley, which is near Ukiah, and worked in corporal punishment in the school. My mother started childcare, kindergarten, in the little town.

There was activism and there was dialogue and there were books and there was music. In a small town, activism looks really different than if you're a red diaper baby in New York. But it still was kind of critical thinking. We were taught to think. And all four of us – I had three siblings – are critical thinkers in our lives.

It was in our breakfast food. So you grow up and whether you become an activist, or how you do that, if you have a foundation, I think, an education, which is what I think should be really a big part of education, as opposed to testing, is how to think critically, no matter what end of the political spectrum you end up on. So I feel very grateful that that was part of my upbringing, even though the town we were in was conservative. There was a lot of farmers and ranchers.

My mother became very involved in the Native American community. Up there, it was the Pomo Indian. She went over to introduce herself when she first came to the town and was admiring – they were exquisite basket makers, they were great artists. They kept waiting for her when she came to meet them, for her to ask one of them to come and be her – to clean her house. That was the only time white women ever spoke to the native women. She didn't. She said, "It's really a pleasure to meet you. I think your baskets are beautiful. I hope to talk to you again." So over the years she actually became an ally to the Pomo people. And we didn't really know this. Much later, Pomo people told us and said how much they had learned about how to negotiate on their own behalf, and had kind of taught them how to deal with white people, kind of explained to them how white law works and helped them learn to organize. I don't think my mother knew she was doing that really, but that's how they experienced her support.

It was very recent genocide in that town. There's a town near where we lived called Kelseyville, which was named after a man who had massacred many Native American people. Only a couple of years ago there was a movement to change the Kelseyville High School team from the Indians to something else. So

there's still a very present and historic – it's not like centuries ago. I went to school with Pomo Indian boys whose grandmothers recalled seeing white men on horses chase Indian people for sport. If my parents had not paid attention to that, we would not have had access to that information, but because of my mother extending herself into that – and I'm sure she did foolish and racist things. We all do. But at least she was willing – and she and my father worked with the Pomo Indians to do an oral history.

So when I say "political," it was just around. It was consciousness and critical thinking, and a certain kind of activism was just in the house. I think that – you know the man who wrote \_\_\_\_\_, which was the big first book about China – I'm trying to remember his name. They were a very well-known family that did a lot around China. Well, you can look it up. Anyway, he came back from China having done a research tour there, and it was I think toward the end of the McCarthy period, and he stayed in a cottage up in the hills of our ranch. I remember my parents saying, "We have a guest, but you're not to mention it at school. No one's to know." And he went there specifically to organize his papers and get copies and everything made before he surfaced and had to face the kind of anti-communist attacks that he would get.

VC: I've read that book. It's great.

HN: Yeah. So it just was interesting that my parents chose to live out in this farm town but had this other kind of life.

VC: Right. Were they members of the party? Is that why he had to leave Los Angeles.

HN: No. I don't think so. Back then, in the early part of it, it would be kind of like if you got a video card or something. A lot of people got cards that didn't really understand what it meant to join the party, especially on the West Coast. I think people were much more savvy about communist politics out East. But the West was really a different creature.

But as far as I can remember I don't think my dad ever was a member. \_\_\_\_\_ was kind of he just signed a petition somewhere and ended up getting on somebody's list. But he was a union organizer at North American Aviation during the war, and his job was to be the union rep on the floor. When the unions kind of split and there was a more conservative union went one way and the more radical unions went the other, he lost his senior in that division and lost that job. So it wasn't like being called up in front of the House on Un-American Activities Committee. But it was a result of this anti-communism that still lives in this country today, and when you travel to Europe it's just a really different ballgame there. People aren't afraid of the Communist Party like they are here. And it wasn't \_\_\_\_\_ to undermine everything. It's not a hot word there.

VC: Right. There are still active socialist parties that are part of the political dialogue, unlike here.

HN: I sang at a communist music festival in Portugal. There were sponsors there like TWA. I mean, TWA doesn't exist anymore, but they were – my festival host was a stewardess from TWA. The Communist Party music has a – but the Communist Party did have their presence at it. I remember singing sandwiched between two bands. A Nicaraguan salsa band was first, and then it was going to be me, and then

it was going to be *the* band, from the United States. I kind of complained to the organizer, saying, "That's kind of unfair. I'm just a solo singer with just me and a piano, and I'm sandwiched between these two." And they said, "No, no. We always put someone in that middle slot on Saturday night that voices the ideology of the party." (laughs) \_\_\_\_\_ says, "That voices what?" (laughs) I said, "The ideology of the party." (laughs)

VC: That's quite a complement, in a way.

HN: From them, yeah. It was like I got elevated and terrified all at the same time.

VC: Right. I was just going to go sing. I don't know what you're talking about.

HN: That's right, exactly. (both laugh) I think I avoided your question about how I came to L.A., but I came to L.A. to go to UCLA, and, like I said, then I went and worked in film and television.

VC: One of the questions I had was how you sort of came to doing Left cultural work. I think you explained that very well.

HN: Well, I kind of spoke to that part, yeah. But it really was – FTA was a real kicker. And also, when I was doing *Hair* on Broadway, it just so happened that was the time when the students at Kent State were killed. I remember coming to work – I was probably nineteen, twenty years old – coming into the theater and the cast was all gathering in the Green Room just trying to figure out what to do, and they voted to stop the show, I think around towards the end, before the "Let the Sun Shine In" finale, and make a statement about the National Guard killing students. Because *Hair* was an antiwar play. It was against all union rules. You're not even supposed to change a word in a Broadway show. \_\_\_\_\_ make a speech. I had just gotten my

union card for doing these, and I was very young and inexperienced about how you come up against authority. So everybody voted to do it except me. I abstained.

I look back at that and go, "Well, that's where I was at the moment." And I kind of am proud of myself for not voting just because there was peer pressure for something I didn't really understand. Even though I was against the war, oddly enough I wasn't really sure where Cambodia was. Because I'd heard about Vietnam, but I didn't know about Cambodia, and I didn't really understand what happened at Kent State. It had just happened.

Later on, when I went back to L.A., Dean Kahler, who was one of the people who survived the shootings and was physically injured and he's a paraplegic, I met him at something and he asked me if I would come to a memorial that was going to happen every year, and write a song for it. So that's when I wrote "It Could Have Been Me," which became kind of an anthem in the peace movement in those days. There were really two peace movements, and probably more than that. You probably learned that when you were \_\_\_\_\_ on the NAM stuff. There was the mainstream peace movement, and then there was the rest of us. So "It Could Have Been Me" was a song that became sung a lot in the alternative peace movement. It wasn't part of the mainstream musical repertoire.

There was a little window of opportunity for folk music to happen, in the Hootenanny times, and especially in New York, but also in North Beach, in San Francisco, and a couple places in Los Angeles, and places across the country. I was still in high school during that time, and because I was headed for musical theater I kind of missed that wave, when there was *Laugh In* and when there was

the Smothers Brothers and when DJs were still playing their own songs, choosing what they wanted to play. Artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and Judy Collins and all those people got kind of a national reputation through that window of opportunity that happened in there, that folk revival. That was really just a heartbeat before my time, so I didn't get in on that wave.

By the time we came up, and especially because we came out \_\_\_\_\_ feminists, there was a whole group of women who created an alternative movement of social change music. Some of us were more on the cusp between the peace movement and the woman's movement, and some were very part of the radical woman's movement. There really was another wave but never got mainstream attention, never got really big time on the television or radio stations, so it worked pretty much on the outer limits. And the fact that it was as big as it was is kind of amazing, but in terms of being in the same category as artists I just mentioned, we were kind of a half a generation later.

VC: That's right. I think one of the interesting things in the concept of the Ash Grove is that, you know, when I was interviewing Ed we spent several months just kind of talking, and he said that the trajectory of the Ash Grove was kind of coming to – it was sort of in decline in the early part of the seventies. And he recalls *you* performing there as being one of the real exciting moments of that era. The traditional folk music and the folk music revival of the sixties that had animated the club, and the scene around that, had kind of dissipated, but Ed recalls very vividly how when you would perform there it brought back a lot of that energy and a lot of that feeling.



HN: That's very nice of him to remember it. That's very sweet. Tell him thank you if you see him. I appreciate that. Because I think it is kind of a – like if there's books written about who are the social change artists of that time, or people will write things and they'll be that late sixties movement, and then they leap to the eighties. They just kind of go over the seventies.

VC: That's absolutely right.

HN: I'm glad that Ed is articulating that. Yeah, we kind of opened up a door for more feminist artists to play at the Ash Grove, and we brought in a different audience as a result of that. It did revitalize a sort of folk scene because people spread everything from radical lesbian feminist music all the way to sort of centralist folk that was now reeducating itself, not only to sing about trying to stop the war in Indochina, but we're now looking at Nicaragua, and looking at farm workers, and looking at feminism, and looking at domestic violence, and looking at child abuse.

It was as if the woman's movement, along with – I mean, I hate to categorize movements because people \_\_\_\_\_. But people who had a consciousness about race, class, gender, or military, all of those things that weren't just single focused, weren't just focused on a single war, were looking at Chile, we were discovering Latin America, we were discovering Tibet, everything was getting put on the table, and including what was going on in the lives of women. It's hard to remember now, but there really were people on the Left who didn't understand why women's issues – they thought it was divisive to put that in, it separated men and women, and the women's movement saying, well, as long as you don't deal with issues of violence against women, and against women not having equal pay, and

about all those things, there's already a division. We're not creating the division, we're asking you to include women's issues in leftist thinking. And then, of course, gay people bringing that in. Even today, transgender people coming in.

It's really hard when a new issue comes up to get the middle, even of the Left, to move quickly on it. Because we're human beings, and it takes people a long time to change some of their old habits. My sister was with the National Theater of the Deaf, one of the two steering actors that traveled with that company. And as a result, I learned about deafness and about them – we learned more about disability, and we began to sign the concerts in American Sign Language, which had not been done before. Then, all of a sudden, it moved over so that political speeches were being signed.

It was as if there was a time where there was a big box on the table that hadn't been opened, in terms of Marxism, or in terms of socialism. There was a lot of personal stuff that hadn't been dealt with, and I think we sort of hurled it all on the table, and that was the stuff I was writing about. The excitement about that I think brought a new kind of artist in to the Ash Grove, and a different kind of audience. Not a different audience, an audience that was ready to be informed about something other than imperialism. And that was a very exciting time. It wasn't mainstreamed, but it was – a lot of times you have to do the work on the edge in order for it to eventually move into the middle. Artists I think have to make choices about where on the spectrum they're going to work.

VC: Can I ask you, when did you first become aware of the women's movement, or when did it become kind of a meaningful venue for you to do work?

HN: I think on the FTA tour. I think singing Beverly Grant songs on the stage, one of which was "I'm Tired of Fuckers Fucking Over Me," which was \_\_\_\_\_. (laughs) Another one was "I Can't Be Yours and Still Be Me." It was really interesting, because I thought that I was not going to get a great response from the predominately male soldier audience. They loved it, because they related it to the authority of the military. I was singing it as women towards the authority of men, but they like totally got it. It was very exciting.

I came back very infused with that and I began to try to write about women realizing that – a lot of the songs that I knew about women, in the folk tradition, were two men who fought over a woman, and the man killed the woman. (laughs) I don't know. There were a lot of old folk tradition songs, but they didn't really speak about women identifying their own lives, and I think that's where the term "women identification" came from, is that a song could be written by a woman and sung by a woman, but if it didn't come from her own identified place, it didn't make it a bad song, it just made it a different song. When one started thinking about writing from a really deeply woman identified place, the music changed, the lyrics changed.

Peggy Seeger was way out in front of that. She wrote that song "I want to be an Engineer," which is a great song. When did she write that song? I don't know, but way before I was thinking about it. So there were little bubbles, like Bev Grant and like Peggy. And, of course, women of color had a very different take on what it meant to be a woman, and they were singing songs. Like Odetta was singing songs that maybe were traditional songs, but she and Nina Simone were

both bringing their female rage to their material in a way that was quite different than say what the white folk singers had been doing up until that time, for women.

I started writing songs that were from a woman identified perspective. And then a woman who was kind of simultaneously going along a different path, but at the same time trying to figure out, if a woman comes from a lesbian identified place, what does that song look like. And she said to me at one point – her name was Meg Christian – she said to me, "Have you ever written a song that was just about a woman?" And I said, "Yeah." She said, "Well, show me." I went through my material and I realized there was a male character in every single song. There was a father or a partner or a son or whatever. It was like she kind of put down a challenge in front of me, what would a song be about if it was just about a woman? It's hard to go back and remember, but we actually had never asked ourselves that question before.

VC: When was that? Do you recall?

HN: I met Meg in the early seventies, and Chris Williamson, Margie Adam, and then Linda Tillery, all kind of around '73, '74, and '75. Then a little bit later, maybe '77, '78, I met Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, who was in the Freedom Singers and then was the founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock, and she sort of knocked me off my path there really in a most extraordinary way, and was a great mentor to me ever since. Because she was asking more questions about racism, from her very strong woman's point of view.

So it was just a coming together of these brave artists, and in this case mostly women, because they were – and my father was reading some of the radical

lesbian literature that I brought home, and he said, "Wow, this is the most interesting stuff I've read since Marx. This is like opening up a completely new ballgame." And it kind of was. That's not to say in the fifties, or even in the eighteenth century, nineteenth century, all the way through – I'm not a great feminist historian, but it's not like women hadn't been organizing before that, and trying to get the vote, and doing all kinds of – I'm not saying we started the woman's movement because women have been finding their place in the world for a very long time. But in terms of bringing sort of new feminist theory and thought to the world, it really – in many ways, it came forward, as in all other movements, it came through the music and through the books and the films that women were making. That's how it got put out on the table so there could be a debate about it.

What was complicated about this was that it was very hard to talk about sexism without it sounding anti-male. And men weren't used to being challenged, so it was tricky. I walked into a store about ten years ago, a record store, and bought something. I gave him my credit card and he said, "Oh, you're Holly Near." I said, "Yeah." He said, "We tried to sell your records a long time ago, but you wouldn't let us because we were men." Now, that's so not true. (laughs) But that's how he remembered it. And he's still pissed. (laughs) It was really hard to write a song that was just about a woman because there were going to be people – both straight women who were protecting their men, as well as men who would say, yeah, but what about the men? It was similarly I watched really radical artists coming out of people's color movement, that if they didn't write nice-nice about being friends and we are the world with white people, white people got scared.

VC: I wanted to ask you, in this context, how did this play at the Ash Grove? I guess too, do you remember when you started performing at the Ash Grove?

HN: No, I don't. I'm in the stage of my life I'm forgetting a lot of things. (laughs) But he probably has some documentation of that. It was in the early seventies. I just don't remember the first time. I do remember my sisters and I, when we were doing the Near Sisters, we played there, and we opened for Brownie McGee, which I think to this day is one of the oddest double books I ever – (laughs) I mean, I do not know what Ed was thinking. It was really fun, and we loved meeting them, but I thought that was such a curious booking. And I think that's what he did. I think he just mixed it up.

VC: Yeah. Well, tell me about the Near Sisters. What would you perform?

HN: We did some of my material with my sisters singing harmony, and then we did some covers. We did a Sam Cooke song. It was kind of like the Andrews Sisters but putting it into the seventies. It was very tight harmony. We worked with just a pianist, and we had three – (singing) "Another Saturday night and I ain't got nobody." The Sam Cooke song. We did it a really tight three-part harmony. We did some jazz stuff with really tight harmonies. Siblings, their voices oftentimes blend really well, so we were kind of experimenting with our sibling stuff.

So I played there alone and I also did some work with them. My sister was remembering one show we did there. Kenny Loggins and Jimmy Messina were just getting their act together. My sister and I lived downstairs from them, so we were friends with them, and they came to the show. Kind of a community of people that just came to hang out at the Ash Grove, whether they were on stage or

whether they just came to listen. I think that was true over at the Troubadour, too, which was a big music – we played there a lot as well. And then we played out at the Ice House in Pasadena. Those were sort of the three spots that people would rotate around and play in. The Troubadour was a bigger venue. It was a little harder to get that date, but I played there several times because my career was going up. But there were a lot of more eccentric and eclectic people that played at the Ash Grove than played at the Troubadour.

We did a fundraiser one afternoon. We were remembering when Linda Rondstadt and Mimi Farina and I sang together, which was – do you know Mimi, who that is?

VC: I'm familiar with the name but I don't know her music.

HN: Joan Baez's sister. And married to Richard Farina, who then he died in a motorcycle accident, I think. She always got stuck with being identified with either her sister or her husband, but she was a really extraordinary person on her own. She died of cancer not so long ago. Anyway, so she and Linda – and, you know, that was back when – I kind of remember – where women like Linda and Bonnie Raitt had to choose to either be the red hot mama or the virgin saint. There wasn't a lot of other opportunities. So Linda was the sweet, fragile one, I think through a group of the Stone Poneys, is that what they were called?

VC: That's right.

HN: And Bonnie was the kind of red hot singer. Now, of course, they've both matured into being extraordinary artists that don't have to push either of those images. They

can really hold their own wherever they want to be. But pre-feminism, there were very small slots for what a woman could look like and be.

Also I remember about the Ash Grove, I recorded a record there. Actually, because I had failed miserably in the studio. We had taken all the money I had and gone to the studio to make a record, with lots of incredible musicians. I just lacked the experience, and when all was said and done and the budget was gone, the record sucked. The recording was just not going to happen. So I took a chance to try to make the money back. We decided to go and do two nights at the Ash Grove live. I worked with Jeff Langley, my pianist, and Rob Moitoza, our bass player. There were two shows a night, so we had four chances. Julie Thompson, who I'd met – earlier I told you about when she was Alex Hassilev's date – she produced it with me, and we just tried to recover from the other. That became my second album. It was called a Live Album. It's out of print, but my assistant can make copies if you want.

VC: Oh, I'd live to hear it. Can I ask you, why did you pick the Ash Grove and not the Troubadour or the Ice House?

HN: I think I was more – I was closer friends with the Ash Grove and with Ed. I worked the other places, but I didn't really have a relationship with them. And we were at a place where we needed this to be as inexpensive and user friendly as possible. So when I thought about where can I go where I really feel safe, it was the Ash Grove.

VC: Why do you put it like that, where you felt safe?



HN: I think the music industry is not a safe place. (laughs) I think it's why I often stayed on the outside of it. I think there's a lot of wheeling and dealing that goes on, and I didn't have a manager, I didn't have an agent, I didn't have any protection. So to go in and negotiate a deal with a club about the rights, and how the audience would be treated, and where we'd put the equipment, and how we would do it probably is not as daunting as I thought, but having to do it all myself – and I knew Ed and I knew that room, I knew the audience, I knew that we could fill it. The Troubadour was bigger. And that we could make sure there was a good audience in the room for the live recording. I went with it because of all those characteristics.

I can't remember this, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was also that I thought it would be really great to have it be recorded at the Ash Grove just because of the personality of the Ash Grove and the identity of the Ash Grove. It would have been more like my people than the Troubadour. The Troubadour had a lot of more industry artists playing at it. I enjoyed playing there, and it was good for my career to play there. I remember when I wanted to do a joint concert with Chris Williamson there, and they didn't want us to do it. We said, "Why?" And they said, "Because you can't have two women double billing. You've got to have a male comic open, or something, but you can't have two women." And we said, "Why?" "Well, it's competitive. Who would go first?" (laughs) "We'll figure that out, you know, we don't care." I had tried earlier with Wendy Waldman, trying to do a double bill there, and they wouldn't do it. But with Chris we finally bulldozed our way through, I guess, but we finally did it. Even telling these stories, I go back

and think, God, I can't believe it was like that. Probably it still is. I mean, how many times do you go to a big rock concert and see two female artists on a double bill? Probably not very often.

VC: No. So this was all when you were living in Los Angeles.

HN: Yeah, I did live in L.A.

VC: Had you heard about the Ash Grove at that point, and you'd been there before as an audience member, just to hang out?

HN: Oh, yeah. I'm sure I had. I don't remember who all we went to see, but – Mose Allison I think I saw there. In fact, gosh, now that I'm thinking about it, I wonder if I didn't do a double bill with him. I can picture a poster with his name and my name on it. But, you know, the other place that I played, and I might be confusing it, was McCabe. But I don't think Mose Allison would have played McCabe because that's such a guitar – they don't have a great piano. So I don't know. If he's got archives there, you might look and see. But it would be likely. I mean, he had interesting double bills. \_\_\_\_\_. People wouldn't do that today, I don't think.

VC: What made me want to ask it, when you were talking about the many different analyses that were coming out of the women's movement, from people of color, from lesbians, and so on. I think one of the interesting things about the Ash Grove is that Ed, in this kind of eclectic double billing, I think also had a sense that you had to sort of present the whole picture as much as possible. You could help people connect the dots.

HN: Right. And if somebody came to hear one artist, they got introduced to the other. It wasn't just like a carbon copy of the first artist. I think you're absolutely right,

and I think the place was vibrant because of that. The diversity and the context. I wish I could remember the first time I played there. Maybe he remembers. And I don't know how I came to – did I just walk in and say, "Hi. I'm a singer. Can I play here?" I don't know. (laughs) I have no idea. But he might have seen me do something with Jane.

VC: I wouldn't be surprised. I don't know if you remember, but could you just describe how you remember the Ash Grove, like walking in, like where was the Green Room, was there a Green Room? Maybe a better way to put it, how did it compare to other places you played?

HN: This is where I want to – I said to you my memory is not good on all of this. I was talking to my older sister, trying to see if she could trigger some memories from it, and she said she remembers going upstairs to the Green Room, and that it was very seedy and always smelled like cigarette smoke and beer, which is pretty much like what every Green Room is. (laughs) I wish I could. I remember being able to, on the stage, just feel like I could really see the perimeters of the audience. I felt like it was a very user-friendly room in terms of – some of the clubs one goes to there'll be like a big pillar in the way or something. But I remember this being a really nice room to play. Other than that, I don't remember too much about it. You'll have to talk to someone who has more memory than me.

VC: That's quite all right. I think though, from what you're saying, the Ash Grove in the larger L.A. scene was kind of unique for artists like you.

HN: It was, because I don't think you had to apologize. All my life when I've gone to sing somewhere I've thought, okay, where am I? Do I have to compromise or be

careful? Just because of the nature of who I am, nine times out of ten I'm not careful. I might be more gentle, but I, for some reason, have always felt called to say things that even if I'm not supposed to, and to try to figure out how to say them in a way – I mean, even now, talking about the Palestinians and Israeli Jews and Israel's policy, or whatever, I don't have a style where I want to hurt people, or I want to turn them off. I'm not a shock value artist. But I also don't want things to go unsaid.

All my life I've worked at trying to figure out the hardest thing, in a way, that can be heard, even if not agreed with. And that was true in the early part of my career, so I feel like the Ash Grove felt to me like a place where I could practice that, where I could practice really saying the hard stuff. And it was an environment that I wasn't going to have the club owner come up to me afterwards and say, "If you want to play here again, don't do that." That Ed was on the side of social change. He was on the side of investigating the hard stuff. And that the audience that came there, if they didn't know it the first time, they knew it the second time, that they came to that club and that's what it was. It was a place where artists could really be who they were, and be real in the world, and say, "Here's some interesting stuff." I'm sure there were straight ahead folk artists that played there that weren't political. But I don't remember ever being worried about –

When I did the Live Album the only time I worried was when I was doing a version of "It Could Have Been Me," I sang a cappella for several minutes before the piano and bass came in, which meant I had to stay in perfect pitch. (laughs)  
That was the only time I really did worry at the Ash Grove. (laughs)

I'm going to have to go soon. If you have other things you want to talk about, or if you want to transcribe this and then think if there are other questions that you want to come back to, I could set up another time. Where are you sort of in your list of questions?

VC: We've covered a good deal of it. I guess if you have to go, though – let me hit pause and then we can talk a little bit, just for like another minute.

HN: Okay.

[recorder off, then resumes]

VC: Go ahead.

HN: Because of the nature of the way the women's movement unfolded – and want to go back and wish that history happened differently, but this is how it happened. There was this need for some of the women who came out of the women's movement, and particularly the lesbian movement, to want to have women only space. As a result of that, there were a lot of – it was not always done well, and there was a lot of anger expressed that led to a division that in some places still hasn't healed, where women would say really unpleasant things to men standing in the lines for concerts, some men didn't feel welcome. There were other times when men actually weren't welcome. In Massachusetts at one time we did a women only concert and a mixed one both to try to satisfy the needs of both audiences. And some group of young students who were in the law department decided to create a case against it, a discrimination case, and as a result the court ordered that some tickets to the women only be sold to the general public. A group of men got in line for those tickets, bought the tickets, and gave them to women.

So it ended up being a women only concert, but it was a – there was a kind of a scar, and because I really didn't support the idea that if people of color said to me, "We'd like to get together without the" – whether it's real or symbolic or whatever – "presence of racism in the room." I would say, "Right on." I wouldn't take it personally. So I never understood why men took it so personally, or why their partners took it so personally, and why it just couldn't be embraced. My father embraced it. I mean, he came – we did a concert in Sonoma County. It was a women only one and then a mixed concert. He went to the mixed concert, and he waited in the car so my mother could go to the women only one. It wasn't a big deal to him.

But it really hurt some people very deeply, and that has hung around, I think, for a long time. There are still people that if you mentioned my name, or women's music at that time, that's the piece that made them go away. I've had people come up to me in the lobby – this is what, thirty years later? – and say, "Oh, my God, I haven't seen you since 1975." Now, they don't know what they're saying, but I do. They stopped coming. Because of the outspokenness of the lesbian community in particular. I try really hard to bite my tongue and not say, "Well, gosh, I'm glad my career didn't depend on you." (laughs)

And they love the concerts. They're thrilled, they're having a good time. Men are coming to the concerts and bringing their daughters. There's a whole new generation of men who really want their daughters to be feminists. Back then, some of it was tricky. There were men – absolutely there were men who honored it

and supported it, like my dad did. Or when it was mixed they would come and they were really happy to hear feminist music.

There were a group of men – I think it was in Minnesota or something – that came up to me one night after a concert and said, "You've become so anti-male in your songs. We've loved your concerts. We're in a men's group and you've been a really important of our education. But now you're just so hostile." And I said, "Well, let's look at the set list. When was I hostile?" And we looked and found that I had chosen that night to do all songs about women, so men weren't even mentioned. And that lack of being mentioned came across as hostility. Their eyes got really big and they said, "Oh, my God. We better go back to our men's group and take a look at this." They were trying very hard to understand what this stuff is all about.

It was a tricky time, and there's a hangover left over from it, in a way. Pretty soon, all of us who were a part of that will die, and then it'll be gone, because the next generation of young people are so cool about gender. They are all over the map and doing some incredible work around it. So I think there'll be a whole – there already is a new music and a new way of being around gender that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't broken that ground, but in many ways I think there are women and men who have kind of a post-traumatic stress for that era. In fact, there's probably a lot of different movements that have post-traumatic stress from that era, because everybody was trying stuff on for the first time. You know, disabled people had to chain themselves to buses to get buses to have wheelchair

accessibility. No matter what you look at, people sitting in at the cafes trying to integrate the restaurant.

It was a really difficult time, and I think artists who worked on the outer edges of that both had the energy and the enthusiasm and the passion and everything that goes with being part of vibrant movements, but also really, there was a lot of warfare, internal and complicated, really complicated stuff. So I would say that – and I'm not enough of a scholar about it that I would ever write a book about it, but I hope somebody does some day, because I think it was an interesting time. I'm not sure how to say anything more about that. I mean, maybe when you listen back you'll think of other \_\_\_\_\_. So that's one bit.

The second bit has to do with the arrival of technology to make it accessible to every kid in every household who has a laptop can have GarageBand, so everybody can make a CD. When I first made records I had to lug records from town to town, and we had to spend quite a bit of money in a studio to do it. Nowadays, anybody can make a CD, but the problem is, how do you find an audience now? There's so many artists out there, and there's very little artist support, like how do people get on the road, how to help them find people to sing to, that whole development of artist-audience relationship. A lot of the clubs have closed. There are places across the country. I'm not saying they don't exist. But to have an Ash Grove in every town, it's hard to keep those open and alive, financially. So that's a real challenge to the next generation artists, is how are they going to get out there.



A big part of my development in my career was that I sang for social change groups. I was brought to sing, sponsored not by a club across the country, but by an organization.

VC: Like the New American Movement.

HN: Like the New American Movement. And like an organization that wanted to raise money for their women's shelter. Or like a group that was doing AIDS work. Or like a group – we had very strong relationships between the artists and those organizations. I don't know if that's the case right now. And I don't want to speak to it because I think it would be more important for a younger artist to answer that question. Like how are they feeling about finding their audience, getting support from social change groups, how are they financially supporting themselves, and how are they developing their careers as social change artists? I think it's tricky.

VC: Yeah. I think it's tricky just being an artist, today.

HN: Yeah, I think so too.

VC: Well, thanks so much for taking the time to talk.

HN: You're welcome.

VC: I have more questions, but what I'll do is have this transcribed and then look at it, and if you're game for a follow-up, I'd love to do one.

HN: Yeah. The other thing you could do, if you want, is email me the remaining questions, and then different times where I'm just sitting and I have ten minutes I can try to answer some of them. It's just taking a long time \_\_\_\_\_. To sit and talk on the phone is harder for me. But I'd be happy to fill in some gaps if you want to send me email questions.

VC: Wonderful.

HN: And then as your project and your book take shape – but I think it would be really interesting for you to talk to Beverly Grant, in terms of political artists at that time, even though she didn't play the Ash Grove, I don't think. She's an East Coast artist.

VC: Do you have contact information for her?

HN: If you'll send me off an email with her name on it as a reminder, I'll find her email and send it to you. Who was the person – oh, Peggy Seeger and Len Chandler, people that you might want to look into. Len in particular because he's L.A.

VC: Right That's great. And, too, if you can think of anyone else who might be useful, who could shed some light on this, I'd love to talk to them. That's sort of the way –

HN: One thing leads to another.

VC: Yeah.

HN: Have you talked to Barbara Dane?

VC: I did. I had a lovely, lovely conversation with her. I went up to the Bay Area and – yeah, sure did.

HN: Good. Len Chandler doesn't really work as a singer anymore, but he is in L.A. and I think he would be a wealth of information because of his work in the civil rights movement. His health has been on again, off again, so, without trying to be an alarmist, I'd talk to him sooner than later, if you can.

VC: Sure. That's good to know. And if you think of anyone else. Certainly I'd love to talk to your sisters, if they're interested.

HN: Okay. I'll ask them if they want to. They're kind of in other fields and – I'll ask them. I'll tell them that you're interested, and if so, they'll get in touch with you.

VC: That's great. I can't ask for more.

HN: Okay. Thanks so much. And I'm really looking forward to reading your article about the New American Movement.

VC: Great. I'll send that along.

HN: Tory[?], I don't know if she told you, but when I was there the paper I gave when I spoke was about radical lesbian politics. And it was very startling to some of the older activists and organizers there. Tory probably remembers it more clearly even than I do. But I really did talk about the importance of separatism, the social change movement. And then later that night at the dance – I had forgotten this part – but Tory talked about how all the women got out and danced with each other, which was a relatively new part of the New American Movement social \_\_\_\_\_.  
(both laugh) But everybody was always happy about it.

Somebody who was incredibly cool – I don't know if he ever came to the Ash Grove, you could ask Ed – was Casey Kasem. Do you know who Casey Kasem is?

VC: Sure.

HN: He's the radio guy. Well, Casey always walks around looking like one of the most conservative people you'd ever know, but has got really good progressive politics. And he's often invited to be the emcee for political events. He's actually Lebanese, so he takes a very strong position about changing the images of Arabs and racism against Arabs. When he and his wife got married I think Jesse Jackson was their minister, and the Gay Men's Chorus I think sang at their wedding. I mean, they're really incredible people. He was one of these people that every time he was

emceeing anything I ever did, he never, ever slipped up. He was always willing to say the word "lesbian" without stumbling over it. He was always willing to talk about \_\_\_\_\_. He was out front. He's really quite wonderful. I don't know whether he wants to be – I'm going to guess he doesn't mind being publicly identified that way because he does show up and do these emcee things, but his other life is just the voice of Casey Kasem on American pop radio. (laughs) Ask Ed whether he ever came to the Ash Grove.

VC: He's in L.A. Casey Kasem.

HN: Yeah, he is.

VC: Wow! I would be very interested in talking to him. That's fantastic.

HN: I have no idea whether he'd even be willing, but it would be interesting to know whether Ed knows him.

VC: Well, I'll ask. I wouldn't be surprised.

HN: Okay. Well, those are the only people I can think of at the moment, but if I think of other folks I'll definitely let you know.

VC: That's wonderful. That's a great start.

HN: Well, great. Take care. Thank you so much.

VC: Have a great day.

HN: Bye.

[end]